

Sea Turtle Conservation Volunteer Programme

Information brochure



**OLIVE RIDLEY
PROJECT-MALDIVES**

Registered NGO CR/04/2022



**OLIVE RIDLEY
PROJECT**

Registered Charity #1165905
in England & Wales

Dear volunteer,

Thank you for your interest in volunteering with ORP at our sea turtle clinical facilities in the Maldives!

Our volunteers play a very important role in the daily running of our clinical facilities and contribute significantly to our ability to care for our turtle patients. As a volunteer, you will support our veterinary team in treating injured and sick sea turtles rescued in Maldivian waters. Together, we strive to return these individuals to health and ensure their safe release into the wild.

This is truly a unique opportunity to experience what it takes to provide wildlife conservation medicine in a remote location. Our centres are some of the most advanced sea turtle medical facilities in the world, and are a regional and global resource for clinical innovations, sea turtle health research, and veterinary training. These are also the only such facilities in the world that treat mainly olive ridley turtles.

This brochure will give you a better understanding of your time volunteering with us. Please feel free to email us at volunteer@oliveridleyproject.org with any further questions.

All ORP research and clinical activities are conducted under permits issued by the Environmental Regulatory Authority of the Maldives. All volunteer experiences are delivered by Olive Ridley Project - Maldives, a branch of Olive Ridley Project.



About Olive Ridley Project

Olive Ridley Project (ORP) was established in 2013 and is a registered charity in England & Wales (1165905), the Maldives (CR/04/2022), and Kenya (NGO-EPFPJ6).



**OLIVE RIDLEY
PROJECT**

ORP has three main charitable objectives:

- 1 To promote humane behaviour towards sea turtles by providing appropriate care, protection, treatment and security for animals that need care and attention by reason of sickness, maltreatment, poor circumstances or ill usage and to educate the public and veterinary community in matters pertaining to sea turtle welfare in general and the prevention of cruelty and suffering to sea turtles.
- 2 To advance the education of the public in the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of sea turtles, through talks, workshops, online courses and training.
- 3 To advance the education of the scientific community by filling scientific data gaps in sea turtle research.





The problem

Sea turtles have existed on Earth for over 120 million years and play a vital role in maintaining the health of our oceans. We depend on the ocean for our survival. It gives us more than half the oxygen we breathe and absorbs more carbon dioxide than all the world's forests combined. To stay healthy, the ocean relies on every animal and plant that lives in it. But like a Jenga tower, if too many blocks – or the wrong one – are removed, it becomes unstable. Sea turtles are one of those vital blocks. Without them, the whole system risks collapse.

Unfortunately, sea turtles face numerous threats to their survival, including entanglement in marine debris, illegal take, bycatch, and the destruction of feeding and nesting habitats. As a result, most of the seven remaining sea turtle species are classified as threatened by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Globally, bycatch and habitat loss are perhaps the greatest threats to sea turtles. In the Maldives, however, fishing is primarily done by pole and line, so bycatch is not a major concern. Nevertheless, since 2011, more than 1,400 sea turtles have been reported entangled in ghost gear (abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing equipment) in the Maldives.

The majority of these entangled sea turtles are olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*); however, green (*Chelonia mydas*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), and leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) have also been reported. It was the frequent entanglement of olive ridleys that inspired the founding of ORP.

The Marine Turtle Rescue Centre in Baa Atoll, established in 2017, provides specialised care to injured and sick sea turtles in the Maldives. Since then, our clinical facilities have expanded to include the Sea Turtle Health Institute at Jawakara, a state-of-the-art sea turtle hospital and training facility, and the Raa Atoll Sea Turtle Care Centre, which supports intensive care cases.

Our research projects

We conduct several scientific research projects, many of which you can contribute to:

Conservation medicine research

Our veterinary team is actively involved in several clinical research projects that advance our conservation medicine mission. We recently established the Sea Turtle Health Database, which is among the largest continuous collection of clinical indices of sea turtle health in the world.

We are also the primary clinical site for the prestigious Morris Animal Foundation-funded Sea Turtle Microbiome Study, which aims to characterise sea turtle gut microbiota and develop pre and probiotic therapies for patients undergoing treatment at our clinical facilities.

Our clinicians collaborate with academic institutions in Europe and the Middle East to advise graduate students in areas of sea turtle health that are our particular expertise: entanglement disorders, buoyancy syndrome, and osteomyelitis, a devastating bone disease. In this way, we learn from our patients, while teaching future researchers and clinicians and sharing our advances with the rest of the conservation medicine community.

Ghost gear encounters & entanglement incidents

Our ghost gear research is a citizen science project that relies on individuals encountering ghost gear in the water or on beaches. Details of the nets and any entangled sea turtles are recorded and entered into our central database on ghost gear and sea turtle entanglements in the Indian Ocean.

The aim of this research is to understand the origins of ghost gear, its drift patterns, and where it intersects with sea turtles, in order to mitigate the issue. While volunteering with us, you may assist with analysis and data entry when ghost nets are brought to our facilities.



Epibionts & parasites

Sometimes, our turtle patients carry other animals, known as epibionts, on their shells. To document and understand the patterns of various species, such as barnacles and leeches, associated with sea turtles in the Maldives, we collect samples from our patients upon intake. Under the guidance of our veterinary team, you may have the opportunity to assist with our sample collection efforts.

Satellite tagging of released turtle patients

Olive ridleys spend most of their lives in the open ocean and we know surprisingly little about them. To better understand the movements and foraging habits of our rehabilitated turtle patients, we initiated ORPTrack, a satellite tagging programme that allows us to track released turtles for up to a year. The data gathered from these tags is continuously monitored, recorded, and analysed. While volunteering, you may have a chance to assist in deploying a satellite tag and releasing a tagged turtle patient.

Sea turtle Photo-ID of foraging and nesting turtles

We have one of the largest databases of sea turtle sightings and identified sea turtles in the world! We collaborate with marine biologists, dive professionals, and tourists all over the Maldives and beyond to collect data.

The goal of this project is to establish a sea turtle population baseline which will allow us to determine population trends and recognise “hotspots” that could warrant additional legislative protection. We also collect sea turtle nesting and hatching data.

Our data analysis has been instrumental in developing the first sea turtle Red List Assessments for the Maldives and has contributed to impact reports for the Marine Turtle Specialist Group Regional Reports, technical reports for the United Nations, and peer-reviewed papers in scientific journals.

If you go diving or snorkelling in your free time and are fortunate enough to photograph sea turtles, you can submit the photos to us to support this research.



Community-based education

We believe we can achieve sustainable and positive change only if local communities are part of the solution.

Education is an integral part of our multifaceted approach to protecting sea turtles and their habitats. We believe that education is a powerful tool for fostering curiosity, raising awareness, engaging people – especially young people – and encouraging action at local, national, and global levels.

We conduct various in-person educational and interactive workshops, talks, and festivals on a broad range of topics, from sea turtle biology to conservation. Additionally, we host and attend webinars and have a vast repository of sea turtle educational resources on our website – including free online courses.

We also offer paid internship programmes to Maldivian nationals at our clinical facilities and in the field of sea turtle research to develop local capacity for sea turtle care, research, and conservation. At our clinical facilities, the interns learn about sea turtle husbandry, sea turtle veterinary medicine, and the wider field of ocean conservation. They assist the veterinary team with treating turtle patients and running of the facilities. Several of our previous interns have gone on to work with ORP or other conservation organisations – and even the Environmental Regulatory Authority – championing the cause of sea turtle conservation.

Our clinical facilities regularly host visitors from local schools and community organisations, offering them full tours and introductions to our patients and the work we do. We also collaborate with the Ministry of Education to bring marine science into classrooms across the nation.



The Maldives

The Republic of Maldives is an island nation situated in the Indian Ocean. It comprises of twenty-six atolls, spanning roughly 90,000 square kilometres and is the smallest Asian country by both land area and population (with just over 500,000 people).

The majority of people in the Maldives are Sunni Muslims and speak a unique local language, Dhivehi, as their primary language. However, English is widely spoken here.

You will fly into Malé, the capital city, before travelling onward to your volunteer placement. While the Maldives is globally recognised for its natural beauty, it is also on the frontlines of marine conservation, with ecosystems facing increasing pressure from climate change and marine pollution.

It is within this setting that our work takes place.

Olive Ridley Project operates multiple clinical facilities across the Maldives through its branch Olive Ridley Project – Maldives, each playing a vital role in the rescue, clinical care, education, and research of sea turtles. Each facility offers a unique experience, environment, and learning opportunity.

As a volunteer, you will have the opportunity to join us at one of two facilities:

- **The Marine Turtle Rescue Centre (MTRC)** at Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu, Baa Atoll
- **The Sea Turtle Health Institute (STHI)** at Jawakara Islands Maldives, Lhaviyani Atoll

In the following pages, you can explore each location to decide which is the best fit for you.

How will you be helping?

During your time as a volunteer, you will be assisting the veterinary team with many aspects of sea turtle care and husbandry, as well as the running of the clinical facilities and educational outreach activities.

These may include:

- General maintenance of the clinical facilities, patient tanks, and other equipment
- Diet preparation and feeding
- Providing enrichment to sea turtle patients
- Daily wellness checks
- Documenting behavioural observations & data collection
- Observing clinical procedures
- Guiding tours for resort guests and other visitors
- Making ghost net bracelets
- Releasing medically-cleared patients

Practical experiences you will participate in:

You will have the opportunity to participate in many practical experiences during your time with us, including:

- Training in proper sea turtle handling techniques
- Building skills in identifying health and treatment progression through direct sea turtle patient behavioural observations
- Observing veterinary procedures including wound management and administration of medications by veterinary staff
- Working with a passionate team in a remote island location and an unpredictable environment

Tutorials you will receive:

1. ORP – history, mission, and impact
2. An introduction to Maldives & Maldivian culture
3. Introduction to sea turtle husbandry and clinical care
4. Sea turtle species identification
5. Sea turtle nesting and nest excavation



Please note:

- All activities are subject to change due to the medical needs of our turtle patients, staff and visitor safety, seasons, and weather conditions. Sea turtles are wild animals and we cannot guarantee that a release or satellite tag deployment will happen during your time as a volunteer.
- We keep physical contact with our sea turtle patients at a minimum since it causes them stress; do not expect to be constantly interacting with the patients as this is a busy medical facility.



Our clinical facilities

Our two main clinical facilities function as full-service sea turtle hospitals, equipped to triage and treat all injuries and conditions affecting sea turtles in Maldivian waters. Both facilities are fully equipped with surgical suites and advanced diagnostic equipment and serve as an expert resource for national and regional rescue centres and the Maldivian government.

Marine Turtle Rescue Centre

Baa Atoll

The Marine Turtle Rescue Centre is our founding facility, established in 2017. It was the first fully-equipped, veterinary surgeon-led rescue centre for sea turtles in the Maldives. Today, it remains a unique facility, treating mostly olive ridley turtles and conducting clinical as well as sea turtle health research.

The Marine Turtle Rescue Centre has seven tanks of varying sizes, supplied by fresh sea water directly from the ocean in a fully automated sand filtration and water-flow regulation system.

Sea Turtle Health Institute

Lhaviyani Atoll

The Sea Turtle Health Institute, opened in early 2026, is our flagship, state-of-the-art training facility and is among the most advanced sea turtle hospitals in the world. It features comprehensive diagnostic and surgical capabilities, including on-site laboratories, imaging, endoscopy, therapeutic laser technology, and a fully equipped surgical suite.

Designed as an integrated campus, teaching, accommodation, and administrative spaces are intentionally clustered to support immersive clinical training.

Volunteer contribution



To help sustain our clinical facilities and conservation work, we ask volunteers to make a contribution towards the costs of their placement and the day-to-day running of our operations.

4 weeks: £2,815

2 weeks: £1,635

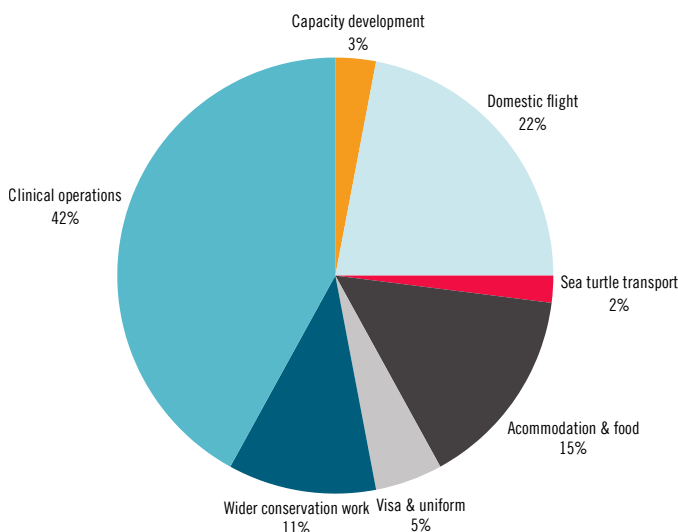
Your contribution also covers return domestic flights from Malé to the facility where you will be volunteering, your visa, ORP T-shirts, three meals per day and shared accommodation for the duration of your stay.

Please note that **your contribution does not include international flights to and from Malé or accommodation in Malé**, should you require it.

What you are funding

How your contribution is allocated

The percentages below are approximate and provide an indication of how your contribution helps support the costs of your placement, our clinical facilities, and our wider conservation work, based on a two-week placement at STHI.



Clinical operations, veterinary care & medicine

Your contribution helps support veterinary care for turtle patients in our clinical facilities. It takes a whole team to make this care possible. While our clinical team focuses on patients, our wider team provides the funding, supplies, logistics and support needed to keep our facilities running. Your contribution also helps cover medicines, diagnostics and equipment needed to provide the best possible care.

Capacity development:

One of ORP's main goals is to develop local capacity to care for sea turtles and conduct conservation. Your contribution helps fund paid internships for Maldivian youth passionate about protecting sea turtles and their habitats.

Sea turtle transport

Transporting injured sea turtles between atolls and islands can be challenging – and sometimes it can take a whole village! Thanks to our fantastic support network, we can coordinate speedy transport to our facilities. In addition, Trans Maldivian Airways (TMA) kindly flies our turtle patients to us by seaplane.

Your contribution helps cover transport costs when sea turtles are rescued outside our support network, including domestic flights, speedboats, and other transport.

Our wider sea turtle conservation work

A portion of your contribution supports our core operations and wider charitable work to protect sea turtles and their habitats. This includes scientific research, education and community outreach, conservation programmes, and the people and resources needed to deliver this work. Your support also helps us respond to emerging conservation needs and invest in long-term sea turtle protection.

Which facility is right for you?



Both of our locations offer a deeply meaningful volunteering experience, with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in sea turtle rescue and conservation medicine as part of our clinical teams.

Marine Turtle Rescue Centre (MTRC)

Our founding facility in Baa Atoll, the MTRC is a smaller, close-knit centre with capacity for up to five turtle patients. We primarily treat moderate cases here, giving volunteers the opportunity to work closely with the veterinary team and gain experience across day-to-day clinical care.

We can welcome up to three volunteers at a time.

Accommodation: volunteers stay in shared staff accommodation at the resort where the centre is based.

Meals: breakfast & dinner from guest buffet, lunch at staff canteen.

Staff social spaces: staff bar + staff shop.

Recreation: staff beach, gym, island snorkelling, and evening cultural & entertainment events. Volunteers have some access to guest facilities.

Sea Turtle Health Institute (STHI)

STHI is our larger, purpose-built facility, with its own dedicated campus and a bigger clinical team. It can accommodate up to seven turtle patients and is equipped to manage more complex cases.

We can welcome up to six volunteers at a time, providing the opportunity to experience a larger clinical environment and work alongside a wider team.

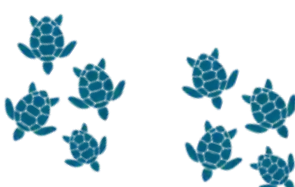
Accommodation: volunteers stay in shared accommodation at our dedicated campus with the rest of the ORP team, veterinary trainees, and students.

Meals: all meals at staff canteen.

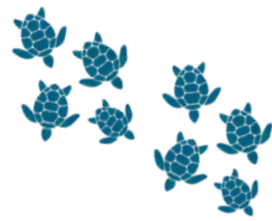
Staff social spaces: no staff bar but larger staff shop.

Recreation: staff beach & pool, gym, badminton court, and game room (table tennis, billiards). Weekly staff entertainment activities. Access to guest facilities requires permission and pre-booking and is limited during high season. There is no access to guest entertainment events.

Whichever location you choose, the core sea turtle conservation volunteer experience is the same, the main differences are the size and capacity of each facility.



FAQ



Is there a minimum qualification or fitness level required to volunteer with sea turtles?

This opportunity is open to anybody who would like to experience sea turtle conservation medicine first hand. However, we do require our volunteers to be:

- 18 years or older
- Physically fit
- Willing and able to do sustained physical labour, including heavy lifting (our patients can be large!)
- A capable swimmer
- Competent in English
- Willing to work as part of a team

This is a highly rewarding, but very physically demanding volunteer opportunity. You will be doing strenuous work in a remote, sandy, hot, and humid environment where daytime temperatures regularly exceed 32°C/90°F and humidity levels hover around 80%. Insects are common.

What are the working hours?

We typically work six days per week, from 09:00 to 18:00, with a one-hour lunch break. Guests are welcome to visit during open hours at specific timings. We also regularly welcome school children and others for educational visits.

What are the accommodations like?

You will be staying in shared, dorm-style accommodations. All rooms are ensuite and air-conditioned. Clean bed linen and towels will be provided weekly.

At MTRC, you will be staying in the staff accommodation area. At STHI, you will be staying in our dedicated campus accommodation with the rest of the team.



What is the food like?

The food is predominantly Asian; however there are pasta and salad options as well. Please let us know in advance if you have any dietary requirements. Food and beverages can also be enjoyed at additional cost at the resort bars (permission and prior booking required at STHI).

Will I be able to use the resort's guest facilities?

As a volunteer, you are considered a staff member rather than a resort guest, so access to guest-only areas and facilities is generally not permitted, except with prior permission.

What is there to do when not working?

In your free time, you can go snorkelling and explore the magical underwater world of the Maldives or you can relax on the beach and enjoy the famous Maldivian sunsets. Watersports are available at an extra cost.

Post dinner, you may attend some of the entertainment activities for staff, such as board games, quiz nights, movie or sea turtle documentary screenings, or just chill out with your fellow volunteers. Guest restaurants and watersports activities are available at extra cost, subject to availability and prior booking.

How many volunteers are there at a time?

We have the capacity to host three volunteers at MTRC and six at STHI. We may also have a trainee veterinary surgeon or students with us at STHI.

How do I apply for my visa?

We will apply for the visa for you.

Hopefully we've answered most of your questions here. If you would like more information or have a different question, please feel free to email us at volunteer@oliveridleyproject.org



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